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Water districts put the squeeze on some spigots

Several North County growers have their supply restricted

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FALLBROOK – Myrtle Creek Nurseries employees can keep watering because the owners have a well.

Other farmers aren't as fortunate.

As water becomes precious in North County, growers are being urged, or forced, to stop irrigating crops during the 11-day shutdown of treated water from the Robert A. Skinner Filtration Plant to the county.

Between 20 and 30 of the largest farms in the De Luz area of Fallbrook had their water meters locked yesterday morning, the most drastic of measures water agency officials hoped to avoid by urging conservation.

“So far, most seem pretty understanding,” said Fallbrook Public Utility District General Manager Keith Lewinger. “They're not happy, but they're understanding.”

The shutdown of the treatment plant began Sunday and is scheduled to continue through Feb. 15. The shutdown is to complete maintenance on pipelines and work on a major expansion of the plant northeast of Temecula. The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, the region's water wholesaler, operates the treatment plant, which supplies about 50 percent of the county's treated water.



JIM BAIRD / Union-Tribune

Rich Sherman's Myrtle Creek Nurseries in Fallbrook draws well water to irrigate its plants. Between 20 and 30 of the largest farms in the De Luz area of Fallbrook had their meters locked by water agencies yesterday.

Officials said the shutdown was not supposed to be a problem. The shutdown was planned for five years, and water agencies had time to stock up on water for their clients.

But unseasonably warm and windy conditions pushed farmers, especially, to keep irrigating heavily as if it weren't winter. Residential customers didn't curtail their water usage, either, leading to a depletion of reservoirs more quickly than expected.

Most of the county, including the city of San Diego and other cities, have enough stored water, treatment plants to process raw water or connections to neighboring cities with treatment plants to get through the shutdown with no problems, Lewinger said.

But yesterday, officials from four North County water agencies that collectively serve the areas of Fallbrook, Valley Center, San Marcos, Lake San Marcos, Escondido, Carlsbad, Vista, Rainbow and Bonsall gathered in Fallbrook to say they are in trouble.

Unless people immediately start conserving more water, the Fallbrook Public Utility District and the Valley Center, Vallecitos and Rainbow municipal water districts say their stored supplies could run out before the shutdown is over, affecting hundreds of farmers and thousands of homes.

Households are urged to stop watering lawns and washing cars. Other tips, such as running only full loads of dishes and laundry, also are encouraged.

Under discounted water rate contracts, agricultural customers are the first clients to get their water shut off during shortages. Even farmers who pay full rate must comply with conservation efforts.

“It's alarming,” said Lori Rodriguez, nursery manager at Yasuda Tree Nursery in Bonsall, who blanketed officials with calls asking when she can water again because her plants were straining after only three days.

The Metropolitan Water District, in response to pleas from local water officials, is pushing to finish work at the Skinner plant before Feb. 15, said Eddie Rigdon, the district's chief of operations. But there are no guarantees, Rigdon said.

Some large consumers of water are tapping other sources. Myrtle Creek Nurseries draws well water for its plants.

“We're feeling pretty lucky right now,” owner Rich Sherman said.

To survive the shortage, other farmers are turning to small storage tanks, lake reservoirs and limited watering in the evening.

The Rainbow water district also is targeting its heaviest agricultural users to stop irrigating, especially those in the Gopher Canyon area. District employees have manually turned off meters or left only a little water running on farms that include homes. Though they haven't used locks, it's an option, Rainbow district General Manager Chris Trees said.

“If we have to install locks, we will. If they get cut off, we'll call the Sheriff's Department,” Trees said. “We don't think it will get to that point.”

But times are desperate, said veteran avocado grower and grove manager Charley Wolk. He manages an undisclosed number of groves throughout North County, and said has complied with orders to stop watering.

Avocados, one of the most popular crops in North County along with nursery crops, are vulnerable because the fruit could start falling to the ground if the trees are stressed enough, Wolk said. If there is a rush of fallen avocados to the market, it could depress prices for farmers.

“We irrigated last week. Now we've just got to ride it out,” Wolk said. “Am I worried? What's to worry about? I can't do anything about it. I can pray.”